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## **An Interview with Alison Bechdel**

Hillary L. Chute, Alison Bechdel

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## **An Interview with Alison Bechdel**

*Hillary Chute (bio)*

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Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* takes place in the tiny, rural town of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, and meditates on her closeted father's suicide in 1980 (a few months after Bechdel herself came out as

lesbian). It provoked an enormous critical response upon its publication in June 2006. The book also received the kind of public admiration that few literary graphic narratives since *Maus* have garnered: *Fun Home* earned a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and two separate, rave book reviews from the *Times*. It is sure to soon become an important reference point in academic discourse on graphic narrative.

*Fun Home* takes on as thematic and narrative filters Albert Camus' *A Happy Death* (the book Bruce Bechdel was reading when he died), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Henry James's *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and Colette's *Earthly Paradise*, among other literary references and allusions. Before *Fun Home*, Bechdel was best known for her ongoing serial *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–present). Here she talks about her research, her methodology, and her influences.

**CHUTE:** What did you think of the *Times* review by Sean Wilsey ["The Things They Buried," June 18, 2006]? He actually drove to Beech Creek, visiting places you drew, and he reports on how accurate your drawings are. **[End Page 1004]**

**BECHDEL:** The really weird thing is I've heard from two other people who have gone [to Beech Creek] since the book came out. So it wasn't just that *Times* reviewer. I think that's partly the result of the fact that I put maps in the book—you really *can* go see it. One thing Sean Wilsey said that I really liked was that if this book had been fiction—if I had made this story up—it really would be meaningless. The whole allure of the book, the reason it's interesting, is because these things really happened. So to have maps, and an actual place you can verify, is kind of cool.

And *Fun Home* is very much about place: this particular part of rural central Pennsylvania, on the edge of the Allegheny Front, where Route 80 got blasted through the isolated valleys in the sixties and seventies. The construction of the interstate during my childhood felt kind of

mythic. It was just over the ridge from us, and it ran from New York to San Francisco. Of course I didn't think then of New York and San Francisco as gay poles, but now I see that was part of it.

*CHUTE*: Can you tell me about the research you did for the book?

*BECHDEL*: I did all kinds of research. A lot of reading in particular. I haven't talked so much about that; people are interested more, I think, in the image research. One whole strand of the book is my father's love of literature, and the particular novels and authors that he liked. As I worked on the book I found this material creeping more and more into what I was writing. I was quoting Camus and Fitzgerald and eventually I realized that the book was sort of organizing itself around different books or authors; each of the chapters has a different literary focus.

That meant doing a lot of reading. Re-reading things I had read before, like *Portrait of the Artist* or *Ulysses*; those are big sources for *Fun Home*. The first and last chapters reference Joyce, like bookends. I read a lot of biographies of the people my dad admired: Camus, both Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, Oscar Wilde—a great biography of Oscar Wilde by Richard Ellmann—and a great biography of Proust. I never actually read all of Proust; I just skimmed and took bits that I needed. I really liked doing all this wandering about in books. My dad pressured me a lot to read certain things when I was growing up and I had always resisted it. In some ways...



## AN INTERVIEW WITH ALISON BECHDEL

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**Hillary Chute**

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gravitational tropical year.  
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An Interview with Alison Bechdel, the lotion rotates the choleric, and also requires a  
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